

Restructuring the Social Sciences? A Reflection from the Editor of *Perspectives on Politics*

Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Indiana University, Bloomington*

Gary King's "Restructuring Social Science: Reflections from Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science" (*PS: Political Science and Politics* 47(1) 165–73) is an honest reflection on King's experience as founder of a successful research institute. Our discipline needs more serious reflection about how we work and what we can learn from each other. In the spirit of such reflexivity I am moved to reflect on King's piece, and to offer an alternative account. My account is also based on extensive experience, as the longtime editor in chief of *Perspectives on Politics* (going on six years) and the even longer time editor of the *Perspectives* Book Review (going on 10 years). This experience leads me to support an emphatically humanistic and pluralistic conception of political science.

REFLECTIONS ON KING'S REFLECTION

King begins straightforwardly: "The social sciences are in the midst of an historic change, with large parts moving from the humanities to the sciences in terms of research style, infrastructural needs, data availability, empirical methods, substantive understanding, and the ability to make swift and dramatic progress. The changes have consequences for everything social scientists do and all that we plan as members of university communities." King outlines this change and indicates how the Institute represents an exemplary way of embracing it. His piece is clear and easy to summarize. It centers on the recent progress of quantitative social science, which he defines as "the subset of 'big data' (as it is now understood in the popular media) that has something to do with people." One sign of this progress is the impact of this science on many areas of social life, from medicine to social networks to sports (King waxes enthusiastic here); another is the diffusion of its insights to "popular books and movies such as *Moneyball*, *Supercrunchers*, and *The Numerati*." But the main sign of progress is the proliferation of quantitative research itself.

Driven by intellectual ingenuity and "the enormous quantities of highly informative data inundating almost every area we study," quantitative social science is growing intellectually—in terms of the capacity of scholars to analyze vast quantities of data in innovative ways—and institutionally—in terms of the development of new research communities centering on this progress. This is transforming, *modernizing*, the sociology of knowledge: "Social scientists are now transitioning from working primarily on their own, alone in their offices—a style that dates back to when the offices were in

monasteries—to working in much more highly collaborative, interdisciplinary, larger scale, lab-style research teams."

It also portends the "end of the quantitative/qualitative divide" in social science. King writes: "The information collected by qualitative researchers, in the form of large quantities of field notes, video, audio, unstructured text, and many other sources, is now being recognized as valuable and actionable data sources for which new quantitative approaches are being developed and can be applied. At the same time, quantitative researchers are realizing that their approaches can be viewed or adapted to assist, rather than replace, the deep knowledge of qualitative researchers, and they are taking up the challenge of adding value to these additional richer data types." King's observations articulate not simply an *institutional* but an *intellectual* vision—his take on the influential approach outlined in King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994), one of the most important books of political science methodology to be published in the past twenty years. "KKV" generated much debate about whether the "methods of scientific inference" valorized in that volume represented the tolerance toward or rather the *subsumption* of qualitative by quantitative research. King believes there *has* been a subsumption and this is a good thing. He suggests that this new model of scientific inquiry not simply effaces methodological divides within disciplines; it also effaces scholarly boundaries between social science disciplines and between the social and the natural sciences. If the new social science centers on "the subset of 'big data'...that has something to do with people," then it is easy to see how all kinds of inquiries—into physics, chemistry, genetics, neurobiology, sociobiology, computer science and "informatics," etc.—contribute to social science by analyzing data about people.

King proceeds to offer practical lessons to "academic entrepreneurs" about how to build research centers designed to promote this vision by providing institutional public goods and services; furnishing administrative management and promoting research efficiency; and "scaling up" organizational innovations from micro- to macro-settings.

King's essay lucidly outlines an approach to scholarship that is growing in influence and momentum and plays an increasingly important role in funding, recruitment, and programmatic decisions at research universities.

But unless our discipline has suddenly become a bastion of Hegelian metaphysics, it does not follow from the fact that something is emergent that it will become hegemonic, nor does it follow from the fact that something is real that it is rational and *ought* to become hegemonic.

Jeffrey C. Isaac is the James H. Rudy Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, Bloomington, and editor of *Perspectives in Politics*. He can be reached at isaac@indiana.edu.

King's essay is *partial*. It articulates *one* perspective on the discipline, and King is admirably frank about this. Instead of arguing with this view, I would like to note some of its elisions or silences, which suggest that it is less ecumenical than it purports to be.

Science

King sincerely wishes to include a range of scientific approaches (to the extent consistent with the logic of "KKV"). Toward his conclusion he warns academic entrepreneurs: "don't try to replicate the sciences," that is, "the physical and natural science model." But what he really means here is to avoid trying to replicate the proliferation of individual *labs*. King's entire piece treats "the sciences" as exemplary and holds that social science will progress by mimicking the nonsocial sciences. ("The social sciences are in the midst of an historic change, with large parts moving from the humanities to the sciences in terms of research style...") King relies on a conception of science with strong positivistic roots that is heavily contested in political science. King simply sidesteps all such discussion. In fairness, he would likely respond that he has already coauthored a book on this topic, and he is now doing something different—drawing lessons from the success of the Institute. Apparently he believes that this is possible without attending to knotty issues in the philosophy of science, for these presumably have been settled. Yet for many, they have not been settled.

Social Science

By construing quantitative social science as "big data" that "has something to do with people," King implies that *social* means "something to do with people." On this view most things having to do with people are central to social science, from their genetics to their brain chemistry to the epidemiology of their diseases to their climatological determinants to their responses to all manner of small group experiments. But there is a *different* view of "the social" as developed by such classical social theorists as Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber. On this view, social science is inquiry into the historically evolved understandings, institutions, and relations of power that enable and constrain what people can do as members of different kinds of societies. A classic statement of *this* view is C. Wright Mills's 1959 *The Sociological Imagination*. But it is a conception developed in different ways by a range of contemporary social scientists, from social theorists like Anthony Giddens, Jeffrey Alexander, and Michael Burawoy to "historical institutionalists" like Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Ira Katznelson, and Peter Hall. This view of social science implies different attitudes about a range of things that figure heavily in King's account, from the exemplary status of quantitative styles of scientific inference to the desirability of effacing the boundaries between the social sciences and the natural sciences. To note this is not to refute King, merely to observe that his perspective on "the social" is selective, and that it bleaches out most of what would be regarded as distinctively social by adherents of a more richly sociological perspective.

Theory

King advises leaders of social scientific institutes to "keep a role for theorists." He writes: "Since most of the advances in the social sciences have been based on improvements in empirical data and methods of data analysis, some argue that the theorists (economic theorists, formal theorists, statistical theorists, philosophers, etc.) have no part in the type of center we are talking about. This makes no sense." King insists that such theorists

play *some* role in contributing to the development of social scientific knowledge. Exactly *what* role is unclear. If you re-read his list, you will note that it includes mainly what might be considered "high tech" kinds of "theory," and does *not* include the kinds of theory that comprise a bona fide subfield of political science—*political* theory, that is, *historical and normative* theory. Such theory might be included under his conception of "philosophers." But this is unlikely. Given his list and its broader context, it seems likely that by "philosophers" he means the kinds of scholars of language, cognitive science, and logic that increasingly dominate academic philosophy departments. Because he has chosen to publish the piece in *PS*, and made a sincere show of ecumenicism, he could have said "*political theory*" if he intended to. King maintains that social science contributes to "understanding or improving the well-being of human populations." Yet ironically his account includes no clear place for the kinds of historical and normative inquiries about human well-being, freedom, and justice that have been central to much recent social scientific inquiry.

A Case in Point

King offers the following anecdote: "Fewer than two decades ago, Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) amassed the most extensive data set to date on the voices of political activists, including 15,000 screener questions and 2,500 detailed personal interviews, and wrote a landmark book on the subject. Shift forward in time and, with new data collection procedures, statistical methods, and changes in the world, a team composed of a graduate student, a faculty member, and eight undergraduate research assistants were able to download, understand, and analyze all English language blog posts by political activists during the 2008 presidential election, and develop methods capable of extracting the meaning we needed from them (Hopkins and King 2010)." King references here his coauthored *AJPS* article, "A Method of Nonparametric Automated Content Analysis for Social Science." I am sure this is a fine article. But it is worth slowing down to analyze this passage. King is talking about scientific progress. His "evidence" for this progress is quantitative *efficiency*. While three senior professors were able to write a "landmark book" based on what was then considered extensive data, today a team consisting of only one professor, one graduate student, and eight undergraduate assistants can process vastly greater amounts of data to "extract the meaning" needed, and to present this "meaning" in an 18-page journal article.

I respect the prowess that is being described. But a question presents itself: what exactly do we mean here in talking about "extracting meaning," and does the move from *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* to "A Method of Nonparametric Automatic Content Analysis for Social Science" really represent unambiguous intellectual progress?

Verba, Scholzman, and Brady's *Voice and Equality*, and their recently published sequel, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, are book-length treatments of one of the perennial questions of political science, traceable to Aristotle: what forms of civic participation do and should constitute a well-functioning democracy? Verba et al. are methodologically sophisticated. But their research agenda centers on big political questions and draws from a tradition of thinking about these questions that is historical and humanistic as well as empirical and "scientific." This tradition, linked to Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*, and to the work of Dahl, Lipset, Tocqueville,

Montesquieu, and Aristotle, is nicely summarized in this passage by Almond: “There is a political sociological tradition going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, continuing through Polybius, Cicero, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Comte, Marx, Pareto, Durkheim, Weber and continuing up to Dahl, Lipset, Rokkan, Sartori, Moore, and Lijphart, which sought, and seeks, to relate socioeconomic conditions to political constitutions and institutional arrangements, and to relate these structural characteristics to policy propensities in war and peace... This broad tradition of political science beginning with the Greeks and continuing up to the creative scholars

Our peer-review process involves many hundreds of reviewers and is designed to counter disciplinary tendencies toward specialization. The reviewer pool for every article sent out for external review includes experts in the submission’s topic and approach; at least one expert on the topic who has published from a different approach and is likely to be critical; and one or two scholars who work on broadly connected topics and who “ought” to be interested in the paper if it is interesting and well written. Every article is thus critically subjected to a *range* of perspectives. We assume that reviewers will disagree. My job as editor is to read every paper in light of the reviews, to balance the reviews against

To note this is not to refute King, merely to observe that his perspective on “the social” is selective, and that it bleaches out most of what would be regarded as distinctively social by adherents of a more richly sociological perspective.

of our own generation, is the historically correct version of our disciplinary history.” Almond’s 1988 “Separate Tables”—from which the above passage was quoted—was the *crie de coeur* of a behaviorist revolutionary confronting a “revolution betrayed.” An eloquent statement of the discipline’s rich history of intellectual breadth and methodological pluralism, “Separate Tables” outlined a conception of social scientific research different from the vision extolled by King. Back in 1988 Almond bemoaned the fact that what he and his generation had accomplished had become *passé*. One can only imagine what he would think about the modernizing aspirations of today’s cutting edge “quantitative social science.”

PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS: A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE, A DIFFERENT VISION

Almond’s essay helped lay the groundwork for a broad questioning of whether political science had become too specialized and method-driven, and whether a more capacious, comprehensible, and civically engaged political science ought to be encouraged. One consequence of this questioning was the founding of *Perspectives on Politics* by the American Political Science Association in 2001–02.

Perspectives is a journal, not a research institute. Its principal purpose is to *publish* and not to generate excellent work. And its “constituency” is the discipline as a whole, and not a “research team” or the specialized audiences to whom such teams speak. It is thus a different sort of enterprise than the Institute for Quantitative Social Science. At the same time, *Perspectives* too is a political science institution that is run collaboratively according to a vision of social science. And the experience of leading such an institution can underwrite a future vision of social science inquiry.

Certain features of *Perspectives* exemplify its integrative mission:

Broadly Interesting Research Articles

We are explicit about publishing articles that tackle big questions, bridge conventional subfield and methodological divides, and are well written and readable. We have a growing queue of excellent articles. In market terms, there is a strong “supply” of research that fits our journal’s distinctive profile. There is also a strong supply of reviewers willing to review manuscripts according to our specific and demanding criteria.

each other in terms of biases, expertise, and credibility, and then to use my scholarly judgment about the promise of a piece and explain that judgment to the author in a careful, constructive, fair, and kind way. Sometimes reviewers will politely decline to review a piece. A political theorist writing about Mill, for example, might say: “I’m sorry, but I’m not a specialist on parliaments,” and then recommend a colleague who publishes in *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. And I will write back, and say: “I know your work, and that is exactly why I asked *you* to read the paper. This paper is about representation. You write about theories of representation. *Perspectives* is not *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and if we are to publish a piece like this, it has to speak to legislative politics experts but also to people like *you*. Will you please evaluate the piece from your perspective and in terms of your knowledge and interests?” Almost always, the response is “yes.” A few things are notable about such transactions: (1) they are outside of the disciplinary norm and they require colleagues to go a bit beyond their comfort zones; (2) they are not automated nor do they involve esoteric methods of calculation or judgment; they involve personal contact, actual correspondence, and human dialogue; and (3) they combine editorial judgment and prompt, intellectually serious, and collegial communication with authors and reviewers. I have found that a great many of our colleagues are hungry for this kind of editing, reviewing, writing, and reading, and are happy to participate in the journal.

While some of these colleagues are connected to research institutes, most are housed in conventional political science departments responsible for teaching a wide variety of nonspecialist undergraduates. Most of them do “expert” research and value this work. But they also value a more dialogic approach to scholarly excellence and a broader style of communication; they know that political science is inherently pluralistic, and that this is what makes it *interesting*.

Books

Perspectives houses the APSA official Book Review. Last year we published reviews of approximately 400 books. Books are a distinctively valuable part of scholarly writing, reading, and discussion. They are more than containers of information and data analysis or vehicles for parsimoniously presenting expert findings. Books offer authors the chance to develop sustained and discursive arguments.

They are the means whereby scholars—individual scholars or small groups of *coauthors* (which is not the same thing as “research team collaborators”)—develop and express their ideas for others whom they regard as *readers* (something different than being a “consumer” of information). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s *Voice and Equality* develops a perspective on American democracy in a way that no journal article can express.

The ability to write a sharp account of a book within space constraints, and to balance exposition and constructive criticism, involves skills and *dispositions* that are central to political science. Our journal helps to nurture these skills and dispositions. Neither books

achievement of methodological prowess as more important than learning languages or history, then the *lack of the political* becomes the problem.

These are complicated issues that have been raised many times in our discipline’s history. King’s way of proceeding is not the only way, and *Perspectives* proceeds in a *very* different way. Our journal’s distinctive approach to what constitutes important research has leaned heavily toward work that addresses political problems and themes of broad importance, whatever range of methods is employed. This is a matter of editorial policy and vision. For all scholarship involves judgments of *significance*. And it is deliberate. Our editorial

At the same time, Perspectives too is a political science institution that is run collaboratively according to a vision of social science. And the experience of leading such an institution can underwrite a future vision of social science inquiry.

nor book reviews represent the most parsimonious way to report research findings. But what makes political science a rich, productive and interesting social scientific discipline is less the reporting of findings, however important, than the contest and communication of *ideas* about important political problems.

Political Problems and Themes

The research that King extols involves highly sophisticated research designs and methods. A recent post on *The Political Methodologist* blog went so far as to suggest that the ideal preparation for research in any “substantive area” of political science would include two semesters of calculus, one semester each of matrix linear algebra, econometrics or probability theory, and computer programming, and a “serious research design/epistemology” course (<http://thepoliticalmethodologist.com/2013/10/13/what-courses-do-i-need-to-prepare-for-a-phd-in-political-science/>). There may well be benefits to such training, especially for those inclined to do certain kinds of quantitative or formal research. But the more technical and specialized political science research becomes, the less such research can serve as a common currency of the discipline.

There is another way of thinking about the intellectual requisites of excellent political science, one admittedly more “primitive” and more humanistic than this. It is the notion that political scientists ought to discern and engage *important political problems and themes*. “Nonparametric automated content analysis” is not a political problem or theme; it is a method. Civic participation. Revolution. Political violence. Democracy versus authoritarianism. Gender inequality. *These* are themes. They implicate a range of important questions, and can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives and through a variety of methods. They are the *substance* of political science. When the proponents of quantitative social science privilege math and methods expertise, they imply that the substance can simply be taken for granted, and indeed that the substance is merely an occasion to deploy methods that allow for the “extraction” of maximum quantitative “meaning” about “something having to do with people.” This brings to mind an old Steve Martin joke about the steps to becoming a millionaire. “First get a million dollars.” The lack of the money is precisely the problem. And when political scientists become methodologists and mathematicians, that is, not simply value a range of methods, but *define* the discipline in terms of the importance of specific methods, and regard the

letters press authors to ask themselves how the representatives of other important perspectives might comment on their paper (e.g., “you are writing about Latin American elections. What do you think Guillermo O’Donnell would have said about your argument?” or “your piece as written is primarily as a contribution to the American political development literature; how do you think it speaks to the literatures on parties or political behavior?”). Part of my editorial role is to prompt authors to construct imaginary conversations with their diverse readers as a way of getting them to think harder about explaining and justifying their arguments. This makes their papers broader and *better*.

We also promote broader thinking through the scheduling and packaging of particular issues of the journal. Our March 2013 issue, for example, centered on the theme of “The Politics of Inequality in the Face of Financial Crisis.” The issue contained quantitative and qualitative work, and included work in every subfield. It was planned so that this work could be read as part of a common conversation about an important and timely political theme. This is not the way most journals work. The pieces published in most disciplinary journals hardly speak to each other at all. We believe that the ability to discern important research problems, and to think broadly about why they are important, does not come naturally. And it is not cultivated by an approach to disciplinary training focused on methods (whether quantitative or qualitative). It is cultivated by the promotion and publication of work that is, for want of a better phrase, *broad-minded*.

Broad-mindedness is a *humanistic* value par excellence.

THE FUTURES OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

King is correct to observe that “large parts” of the social sciences are “moving from the humanities to the sciences...” But large parts of the political science discipline are *not* part of this move and do not wish to be part of this move. And the fact that *Perspectives on Politics* exists as the institutional co-equal of the *American Political Science Review* is one important sign of this. In the very heart of institutionalized political science in the United States there exists a successful and arguably popular scholarly journal that promotes, and enacts, a practice of broad-minded, ecumenical, intellectually serious, and politics-centered political science.

Perspectives on Politics is one political science journal among many, and its distinctive editorial philosophy is hardly universally embraced. It represents *one* possible vision of political science that coexists

with, jostles with, and sometimes competes with, other visions. King's social science is surely formidable. But it has not cleared the field, and alternatives are very much alive.

In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes a major "progressive": "he has implanted in a generation leavened throughout by him the worship of the 'power of history' that turns practically every moment into a sheer gaping at success, into an idolatry of the actual... the man who has learned to crook the knee and bow the head before the power of history nods 'yes, at last,'

Political science is a science. It thus properly fosters the development of a wide range of techniques, methods, experiments, arguments, and approaches. The dramatic growth in the sophistication, academic cache, and instrumental usefulness of quantitative social science is an accomplished fact of contemporary scholarship. And it represents progress for one conception of social science. But it does not represent the future of political science. For there are alternatives. And the future of political science remains open.

When the proponents of quantitative social science privilege math and methods expertise, they imply that the substance can simply be taken for granted, and indeed that the substance is merely an occasion to deploy methods that allow for the "extraction" of maximum quantitative "meaning" about "something having to do with people."

like a Chinese doll, to every power, whether it be a government or a public opinion or a numerical majority... If each success has come by a 'rational necessity,' and every event shows the victory of logic... then—down on your knees quickly, and let every step in the ladder of success have its reverence." Nietzsche was attacking the ultimate metaphysician, Hegel. He was also targeting a deeper and more pervasive idea, the idea that the progress of technique and method necessarily means intellectual or ethical progress.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Adrian Florea, Bob Keohane, Rafael Khachaturian, Margot Morgan, James Moskowitz, Sid Tarrow, and Brendon Westler for their comments. ■

REFERENCE

Almond, Gabriel. 1988. "Separate Tables: Schools and Sects in Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 21(4): 828–42.